

## Feb Celebration 2019

February 2, 2019

Greetings, Middlebury Class of February 2018.5. I want to congratulate you with a poem written by the late American poet Mary Oliver. It is a poem about the great outlines of winter and the great inspiration in a time of freezing temperatures and colder sunlight and long hours of reflection in the dark. And I will read it twice because you need to hear me say it at least twice. This poem reminded me of you—the winter graduates, February 2019.

### Starlings in Winter

Chunky and noisy,  
but with stars in their black feathers,  
they spring from the telephone wire  
and instantly

they are acrobats  
in the freezing wind.  
And now, in the theater of air,  
they swing over buildings,

dipping and rising;  
they float like one stippled star  
that opens,  
becomes for a moment fragmented,

then closes again;  
and you watch  
and you try  
but you simply can't imagine

how they do it  
with no articulated instruction, no pause,  
only the silent confirmation  
that they are this notable thing,

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin  
over and over again,  
full of gorgeous life.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,  
even in the leafless winter,  
even in the ashy city.  
I am thinking now  
of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots  
trying to leave the ground,  
I feel my heart  
pumping hard. I want

to think again of dangerous and noble things.  
I want to be light and frolicsome.  
I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing,  
as though I had wings.

As you gather here with your families, your friends, your professors, your advisors as witnesses to all your hard work over the past four years, I want to tell you: there isn't a line in this poem that doesn't remind me of all the things that you are. You were in college in one of the most tumultuous times in American history, and in higher education. In these times, you've built bridges. You've protested. You've created. You've traveled to make the world better. You've stayed at home to make the world better.

What I remember most: You came to us in winter. You began like the starlings to fly in winter. You are 100 graduates: 53 women and 47 men. You flew in from 27 states and 16 countries. And I can describe to you how you flew—how you have been acrobats in the freezing

wind. Twenty-two of you completed a joint major or a double major. Seven of you majored in a foreign language, and 94 of you studied at least one foreign language at Middlebury. Twenty-two of you took on the rigors of the Middlebury Language Schools, and almost 70 of you studied abroad.

You have been stars dipping and rising across the arc of your Middlebury career, and as a result you have made Middlebury better for all of us. You played on club teams and varsity teams. You competed in NCAA championships, set school records, and helped lead your team to national and NESCAC titles. One of you directed last fall's Middlebury Classic Quidditch Festival, which brought more than 700 muggles to campus. Another helped launch NER Out Loud, the podcast that features the work of the New England Review, our literary quarterly, read aloud by your fellow students.

You have done things that people thought were impossible. You have done things that you yourself have thought were impossible. Many of us, watching you, have simply not been able to imagine how you have done it: One of you, without a strong athletic background, started mountain biking as a sophomore and within two years competed at the National Collegiate Mountain Bike Championships. And this wasn't just for personal ambition. Your goal is to become the first Afghan to race in the Olympics in cross-country mountain biking—and empower Afghan youth with the joy of riding and competing on mountain bikes, and connecting people across borders and cultures through their shared love of the sport and the outdoors.

And what lessons you all have prepared for us, even in the leafless winter: You were Middlebury College Access Mentors, changing the lives of young people in Addison County. You were Privilege and Poverty interns, helping to strengthen distressed communities both locally and nationally. You helped build an accessible network of local food systems to help feed area children. Through your work in Vermont and in the world, you have created examples for all of us to follow.

And here is the part that is much harder sometimes for the world to see: you have fragmented, come apart, and then become whole again. You wouldn't be here with us, flying in leafless winter, if you had not struggled—if you had not come apart and then become whole again. Don't ever forget those moments even though they might be difficult to remember. Don't ever forget that, even though we marvel at you, you should marvel at yourselves. Because you have done what you thought you could never do. You overcame your own self-doubt, your own sense that you were not perfect at something.

And as you struggled with this, you became resilient. You understood something powerful about your own staying power and ability to pursue a vision even if you yourself, much less the world, didn't believe it—at least not at first. And then slowly, through one small act after another, you became whole again. And you enacted your vision on behalf of all of us. You were making all of us better. You have risen and spun and started all over again, full of gorgeous life.

So now you fly one more time away from us in the leafless winter. May you rise and spin and start all over again, full of gorgeous life. We marvel at you now, and we will marvel when you come back to see us at Middlebury. We know that you will be gloriously spinning, taking your place in the world. And creating horizons filled with visions and patterns and inspiration. You are improbable, beautiful, and afraid of nothing. As though you had wings.

Let me remind you of who you are again.

#### Starlings in Winter

Chunky and noisy,  
but with stars in their black feathers,  
they spring from the telephone wire  
and instantly

they are acrobats  
in the freezing wind.  
And now, in the theater of air,  
they swing over buildings,

dipping and rising;  
they float like one stippled star  
that opens,  
becomes for a moment fragmented,

then closes again;  
and you watch  
and you try  
but you simply can't imagine

how they do it  
with no articulated instruction, no pause,  
only the silent confirmation  
that they are this notable thing,

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin  
over and over again,  
full of gorgeous life.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,  
even in the leafless winter,

even in the ashy city.  
I am thinking now  
of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots  
trying to leave the ground,  
I feel my heart  
pumping hard. I want

to think again of dangerous and noble things.  
I want to be light and frolicsome.  
I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing,  
as though I had wings.

### **Office of the President**

Old Chapel  
9 Old Chapel Road  
Middlebury College  
Middlebury, VT 05753  
802.443.5400  
[president@middlebury.edu](mailto:president@middlebury.edu)